Requirements for a Unified Binding Theory: Lessons from Halkomelem Salish

In describing the distribution and binding properties of pronouns and anaphors, there are two competing approaches: the syntactic structural approach, and the predicate-argument structure approach. Generally considered to be competing theories, in this paper, I examine data from Halkomelem Salish, a language of Southwest British Columbia, demonstrating that neither a Chomsky(1981) based syntactic approach nor a predicate-argument structure approach along the lines of Reinhart and Reuland(1993) will adequately account for the full set of data, and that elements of both approaches will be needed.

Halkomelem Salish lacks overt reflexive anaphors. Instead, reflexivity is marked on the predicate, which takes one syntactic argument, as shown in (1). Wiltschko(2004) presents arguments that reflexivization is a derivational process taking place at the lexical level, marked by the suffix -thet. Setting aside the finer details of the analysis, the end result is crucial: in a situation where there is only one argument represented in the overt syntax, structural relations such as c-command lose any descriptive power. Thus, the lack of any mention of the Chomsky’s Condition A in the literature is not surprising. However, a treatment based in Reinhart and Reuland(1993) has no problems, as a lexically reflexive predicate is predicted to have co-indexed arguments.

Unlike reflexives, the binding properties of independent pronouns can be analyzed using a syntactic account, with the binding properties appearing to be predicted by Condition B: pronouns must never be c-commanded by an antecedent in the same clause. This is shown in (2). In this VSO structure, subjects in Halkomelem Salish c-command their objects, and an independent pronoun possessor in the object position (2b) can not be bound by the c-commanding subject. This contrasts with the situation in (3), an SVO structure also available in Halkomelem Salish, where the antecedent is embedded in a complex subject, and co-reference with an object is possible. While a syntactic account captures all this data, it should be noted that the predicate argument structure account will as well, as the co-indexed items in (2) and (3) are not arguments of the same predicate, thus there are no restrictions on co-reference.

More problematic though are data of the type shown in (4), where the co-referential elements are arguments of the same predicate. It is noteworthy that this sentence is ambiguous; it can either have a reflexive reading, or a disjunct reference reading. Here, the generally assumed complementarity between reflexives and referential pronouns breaks down, and only a syntactic analysis in which there is no c-command relation between the two arguments will permit the ambiguity; a pronoun with no c-commanding antecedent has no restrictions on reference. Crucially, the Binding Theory advanced by Reinhart and Reuland(1993) does not predict the reflexive reading. In their terms, only reflexive-marked predicates can have co-indexed arguments, and this predicate meets neither of their conditions for reflexive marking.

The final complication in the data comes with (5), where it is shown that Condition C effects, otherwise demonstrable to be active in the language, do not hold across clause boundaries. Here, a matrix clause pro binds an embedded R-Expression. Further testing will be required to determine whether this is a function of the CP clause boundary, or a function of the fact these elements are arguments of different predicates, but either way, this reduces to a question of locality.

This is the approach my paper takes. Through an examination of the relevant data, I explore the relative merits of a syntactic versus a predicate-based account. As shown, the intransitive reflexives dictate that there needs to be some recourse to predicate-argument structure, but the independent pronouns demonstrate that syntax remains relevant. Through both, along with the R-Expressions, it emerges that locality is also a factor. Having established that neither predicate-argument structure nor syntactic structure on their own will be sufficient to capture the distribution of pronominals in this language, two avenues of research are opened. Either this is a parametric variation, whereby languages may vary in requiring one, or the other, or both in order to account for binding phenomena, or it is time to seek out a new unified binding theory that makes reference to both predicate-argument structure and syntactic structure, within a constrained local domain.
Examples

(1) q’óy-

- thet te swíyeqe.

kill-refl DET man

‘The man killed himself.’

(2) a. hélpex-es te Strang te sthóq’i-s
eat-3.SUBJ DET Strang DET fish-3.POSS

‘Strang is eating his fish.’

b. * hélpex-ex te Strang te sthóq’i-s tů-tl’ò.
eat-3.sc subj DET Strang DET fish-3.sc poss DET-INDEP PN

‘Strang is eating his fish.’

(3) te tál-s tl’ Strang mamáy-t-em tů-tl’ò.

DET mother-3.POSS DET Strang help.REDUP-TRANS-INTRANS DET-INDEP PN

‘Strang’s mother is helping him.’

(4) kw’êts-l-exw-es tů-tl’ò.

see-TRANS-3.OBJ-3.SUBJ DET-3.INDEP PN

‘He saw him.’

(5) st’ówel pro [\_{CP} kw’-s-es scekewót te Strang.]
think pro DET-NOM-3.SUBJ smart DET Strang

‘He thinks Strang is smart.’

References


